



The Tale of the Sands

Maghrebi Sufism - Tunisia

A stream, born from a spring in the mountains, flowed down through forests and ravines. It ran through valleys full of fruit trees, giving drink to trees and plants, humans and animals. It felt that its destiny was to quench the thirst and nourish the life of all beings it came across. That feeling gave it a deep sense of satisfaction and plenitude.

But, suddenly, one day, the arid valley through which it placidly flowed became a desert, and its waters stagnated and disappeared into the sands.

Determined to continue on its way, and fulfil its destiny, the stream poured its waters again and again into the sands, and resolved to cross the desert at all costs. In the desert there were almost no creatures so it could not quench their thirst and nourish anything with life. This condemned it to a life that was not only dull, but meaningless. But, try as it might, its waters disappeared almost immediately into the golden sands as if by enchantment.

Finally, it heard a voice inside telling it: 'The wind crosses the desert'.

It did not know whether that voice, coming from within it, was the voice of the desert itself or the voice of its own spirit. But without giving it time to find out, the voice spoke again: 'If you strive to cross the desert as you cross the ravines and valleys, your waters will sink into the sands, again and again, or you'll turn into a swamp.'

‘No, never!’ thought the stream, which was terrified by the idea of immobility and not being able to offer pure, crystal-clear water to all beings.

‘You’ll have to abandon your old ways of doing, seeing and understanding things in order to reach across,’ the voice went on. ‘You’ll have to become one with the wind in order to cross the sands’.

‘But how do I become one with the wind?’ asked the stream.

‘By letting the wind absorb you,’ replied the voice, which came with serenity from within.

The stream didn’t like that. It had never been absorbed by anything before, and it feared losing its identity. In fact, its identity – and its destiny, which was part of its identity – was all it had in life.

‘But if the wind sucks me in, I’ll cease to be me,’ protested the stream.

‘Well ...’ said the voice condescendingly, ‘you’ll cease to be the you that you are now, but that’s not the real you. The real you is your essence, not your form. When the wind sucks you in, your form will change, but your essence will remain the same. You’ll not be a stream, but you’ll still be water, invisible, but water nonetheless. And then, when the wind has crossed the desert, you’ll rain down from the sky and become a stream again ... or maybe you’ll become a big, fast-flowing river.’

And the stream felt somewhere inside itself that it had once been invisible water, and thought that, under the circumstances, it would have to choose between that or becoming a bog. So, seeking refuge in the lap of the Sun, it let itself be rocked by its warmth until, suddenly, it felt as if it was flying.

And the wind carried it in its arms beyond the desert sands to the blue mountains which it had seen in the distance from the barren valley. And, suddenly, it felt itself regaining its liquid and crystalline aspect. It abandoned itself in a long and placid fall until it reached the ravines, only to regain its former shape as a stream, in search of new horizons and new beings with thirst to quench and life to nourish. And now it knew what its true essence and identity was.

Meanwhile, in the distance, the wind was blowing the desert sands and, as they brushed the ground and each other, the sands sang in murmurs: 'It's our destiny to make known the true essence and identity of every being'.

This is why, among the darwishes, it is said that the way in which the River of Life is to continue its journey is written in the sands. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2021).

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Comments

Idries Shah, on whose version we have based the present adaptation, states that this story is found in many languages, although it is usually told by members of Sufi mystical orders. Specifically, Shah claims that his version comes from Awad Afifi, a Tunisian who died in 1870. It must have been taken by Sir Fairfax Cartwright for his book *Mystic Rose from the Garden of the King*, published in 1899.

Although Idries Shah places the crux of the story in the individuality and essence of beings, in our version we have chosen to change the concept of individuality to that of *identity*, as we feel it would better fit the idea that it is intended to convey. In this sense, the story would fit perfectly with the thesis of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), who developed the thesis and movement of Deep Ecology. According to Naess, in order to resolve the alienation of human being from nature, we have to direct our efforts towards an *identity* with nature in order to integrate ourselves into natural processes.

Naess advocated an expansion of one's own identity. In this way the idea of surroundings, of environment, becomes unnecessary, since *you are also your surroundings and must look after your interests*. This is because, in linking ourselves to life and nature, individual identity develops through interaction with beings and elements of nature, both organic and inorganic. Thus, distancing oneself from nature means distancing oneself from a part of what the 'I' is composed of, and this

brings about a fracturing of identity, and hence of one's sense of self and self-respect.

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Sources

Shah, I. (1969). The tale of the sands. En *Tales of the Dervishes* (pp. 23-24). Nueva York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 5e: Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.



The
Earth Stories
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The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart.

